

THE FIRST SUPERSTAR

ASHOK KUMAR, THE ENDEARING Dadamoni (jewel of an elder brother) of Bollywood was probably more imitated than any actor, though, as a star, he was not as weighty as the succeeding triumvirate of Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand and Dilip Kumar. From his debut film, *Jeevan Naiya* (1936), where the lead role came to him accidentally as the actor originally selected had an alcohol problem, he brought into acting the hitherto rare quality of controlled body movement and subtle gestures. These were path-breaking changes in Indian cinema which had gone "talkie" only five years earlier. The mike and lights were so restricting that acting was limited to hamming the lines with the body in stony immobility. His next film, *Achhut Kanya*, was a smash. It not only established him as a face but set his naturalist style as a benchmark, with the added feature of the popular song *Ban ki panchhi* sung by him in sync with the camera. In those pre-dubbing years, he could summon the skill to jive from one mike-point to another while singing.

He was more than a skilled actor. He was the precursor of the industry's "star" phenomenon. It began with *Kismet* (1943), a policeman's-son-turned-criminal story (Ramesh Sippy's *Shakti* is its later mutant), in which, as the bad son he took the audience by storm. A cigarette hanging from his lips, Bogart-style, he emoted with ease in the great father-and-son scenes in which defiance alternated with love. *Kismet* ran in a Kolkata theatre for three years; in Mumbai a theatre was named after it. Three decades later, when *Shakti* was made, Sippy gave Ashok Kumar only a cameo role. Yet His name led the star billings, followed by those of Dilip Kumar and Amitabh Bachchan.

He also pioneered the trend of actors taking to production as he took control of Bombay Talkies, the production house that had launched him. It

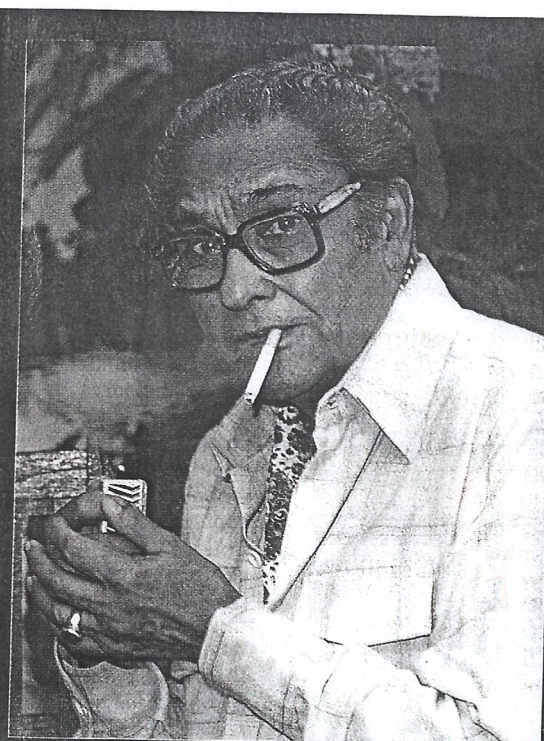
was a trend that later became common.

Though his tenure as a film entrepreneur wasn't very successful—Bombay Talkies crashed after 10 years of his stewardship—his acting career took him to a wide range of roles. The *Kismet* anti-hero returned to his oeuvre when he played a drug peddler in Shakti Samanta's *Howrah Bridge*

pavement opposite Bombay Talkies when I spotted him, called him inside, and asked him what did he intend to be. He said, '*Hero banna chahta hoon*.' From the 1960s, there was a new Ashok Kumar playing character roles with an elan seldom seen in Bollywood. In *Jewel Thief*, he reprised his weather-beaten villain role. In Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Mili*, he was the tragedy-struck father of the destined-to-die daughter played by Jaya Bachchan. In *Khubsoorat*, he played the henpecked patriarch of a family. In Basu Chatterjee's *Shaukeen*, he teams up with A.K. Hangal and Utpal Dutt, three old men on a sexcapade that ends in a comic disaster.

A year after *Shaukeen*'s release, Ashok Kumar met this correspondent at the Juhu Tara Road bungalow of his highly talented actor-director-singer-music director brother Kishore Kumar. When asked how he had done a film on sexual urges when the body was old and refusing, he replied, "A good actor trusts his memory." Then he pointed at his brother, the late Kishore, who had many stormy marriages, and said, "For Kishore, memory is not enough."

Ashok, Kishore and third brother Anup Kumar formed the Marx brothers of Bollywood, next only to the Kapoor clan. They were



ASHOK KUMAR
1911-2001

(1958) with Madhubala as the Anglo-Indian gun moll. Ashok Kumar led the cast in many popular films of the 1950-60s like *Mahal*, *Gumrah*, *Aarti* and *Kanoon*. But his capacity to evoke emotions came through best in *Bandini*, a Bimal Roy film where he played an ageing freedom fighter torn between duty and his love for Nutan, who is at once innocent and the murderer of his wife.

As a superstar, Ashok Kumar had wilted long before the triumvirate, even though some of them were his own discoveries. Like Dev Anand who—as he describes in his 1992 Bengali autobiography *Jeevan Naiya*—"was sitting on the flagstone of the

NRBS (non-resident Bengalis), born in Bhagalpur in Bihar and brought up in Khandwah in Madhya Pradesh. Ashok Kumar (then Kumud Ganguly) dropped out of a law course in Calcutta University and destiny brought him to Himanshu Rai's Bombay Talkies, which got him paired with Rai's famous wife Devika Rani and later Lila Chitnis. He evolved over seven decades into a messiah of modern acting, a harbinger of stardom and an elder statesman, the Dadamoni of not only films but successful TV shows like *Hum Log*. With his death, The Mumbai film world has lost an important link in its chain of evolution.

—Sumit Mitra